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*The Nature and Elements of Poetry.* By Edmund Clarence Stedman. Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin & Company. The Riverside Press, Cambridge. 1892. 12mo, pp. xx., 338.

*The Old English Dramatists.* By James Russell Lowell. Same publishers. 1892. 12mo, pp. 132.

It is something of a truism to say that no one can talk so well or write so well about poetry, when it is not his own, as a true poet. The names of Sidney, Jonson, Milton, Dryden, Wordsworth, Shelley, Goethe, Arnold, Lowell, and many another immediately recur to us, and we may be very sure that if those conversations at the *Mermaid* had found their Boswell, we should have to put Shakspeare at the top of the list. There has been, of course, since the days of Aristotle a great deal of good criticism directed towards poetry by men who never learned the art of verse. Still, just as it takes a thief to catch a thief, so it takes a poet to catch the spirit of poetry. But the thief when caught can be held, which is by no means true of the spirit of poetry. If the nature of that tricky sprite has ever been apprehended, it has certainly never met with Ariel's fate and been enclosed in a cloven trunk—*i. e.*, within the binding of a book. We are just as much at a loss to know what poetry is as we were three thousand years ago—as much at a loss as we were before Mr. Stedman delivered the lectures at the Johns Hopkins University which make up his recent volume.

There have been two, perhaps we may say three, main methods of investigating the "nature and elements of poetry." One may be termed the rhapsodical method, best represented, perhaps, by Sidney and Shelley. The second is the scientific method, represented by Aristotle and, in our own day, most admirably by Mr. Theodore Watts, himself a poet, by the way. The third, which combines the two first, may be called the desultory, and is numerously represented by such names as Coleridge, Lamb, Landor—in fact, most of our great critics. The greatest English critic since Dr. Johnson, the late Matthew Arnold fits best into the second category, while his great American contemporary, Lowell, falls into the third.

This is not the place, and it might be idle anywhere, to attempt to determine which of these methods has succeeded best in making us understand what poetry is in its essence. The world could ill afford to do without Sidney's "Defence of Poesy," or Lowell's essays, or Theodore Watts's famous article in the "Encyclopædia Britannica."

We wish we could say that it could not afford to do without Mr. Stedman's last volume, but we cannot. Not that we are not glad to have read it, not that we do not cordially recognize the high aims of its estimable author and his not infrequent felicity of thought and phrase. On the contrary, we have enjoyed his book and we heartily commend it to our readers, for we are certain that it will do good. But it is the unfortunate lot of those who serve that severe mistress, Poetry, whether as interpreters (critics), or priests (poets), that unless they reach a plane of excellence commensurate with the dignity of her they serve, their best efforts in her behalf must prove but transitory and of little worth. It is the old story—many are called but few chosen. Those who feel themselves summoned may do much good in their day and generation, but posterity will not regard them.

This is what we feel about Mr. Stedman's book. Like his "Victorian Poets" and "Poets of America," it is serious, fairly free from crotchets, wholesome—eminently respectable and worthy. It will appeal to a host of readers who would not be affected by work of a higher order—it can even be called "missionary criticism;" but it is not illuminating, it is not inspiring, and hence we fear that a hundred years from now no zealous editor will do the service for it that Professor Cook did for Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" some months ago. If we are mistaken and some such editor should arise, we wonder how he will explain his author's presuming to speak of Mrs. Browning's sonnets as comparable to Shakespeare's.

With Mr. Lowell's posthumous volume the case is different. Although the six lectures that make it up were never

revised by their author, and although they are desultory to a degree, they will be read with delight to-day and they will be read, at least by scholars, a hundred years from now. Lowell was one of those men that have the gift of saying things that cannot well be forgotten; and years hence students of the English drama will be glad to turn to this little book to get his latest views about Marlowe, or Webster, as the case may be. In other words Lowell is illuminating and inspiring—is a genius. What can be more illuminating than this sentence? He is referring to the fact that Shakspeare preferred to take his plots from stories that he found ready to his hand rather than invent them, and he remarks: "All the good stories, indeed, seem to have invented themselves in the most obliging manner somewhere in the morning of the world, and to have been camp-followers when the famous march of mind set out from the farthest East."

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*France under the Regency, with a Review of the Administration of Louis XIV.* By James Breck Perkins. Boston and New York. Houghton, Mifflin & Company. The Riverside Press, Cambridge. 1892. 8vo, pp. xvii., 603.

THIS is a remarkably fair and accurate history of France under the regency of Orleans (1715-1723) and a lucid sketch of the reign of Louis XIV., after the death of Mazarin (1661-1715). Whatever incongruity may appear to arise from the juncture of a somewhat minute history and a comprehensive historical sketch is overlooked when it is remembered that Mr. Perkins had already written "France under Richelieu and Mazarin," and that he intends to devote future volumes to the state of France in the last three quarters of the eighteenth century. A sketch of French history during the reign of that monarch who, we are now told, did not say but who might have said, "L'Etat, c'est moi," was necessary as a sort of bridge for the historian and his reader. This bridge is by no means a frail structure, however, and it may be recommended as thoroughly trustworthy.